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SUBJECT: MOROCCAN ELECTIONS: OPTIMISM FROM ACROSS THE ATLAS

REF: A. A) RABAT 996
[B. B\) RABAT 1155](#)
[C. C\) RABAT 1248](#)

Classified by Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Econoff and Econ FSN visited the largely Berber, rural-oriented Atlas and trans-Atlas towns of Azrou, Midelt and Errachidia preliminary to the September 7 parliamentary elections. Among the business associations, non-government organizations (NGOs), local government officials, youth, and parliamentary candidates, met there was a surprisingly optimistic mood towards the elections, compared to elsewhere. The most surprising finding was that nearly everyone interviewed expected strong participation by young voters. As expected, rural voters plan to participate at higher rates than urban voters, and place greater emphasis on who a candidate is than his party affiliation. Most important to our contacts was a candidate's ability to bring public works projects to these economically disadvantaged areas. Several made unsolicited attacks on the (Islamist) PJD party for trying to manipulate its ties to Islam and its charity activities. They added that the PJD would do poorly in their region in the elections. Candidates are increasingly wary of attempting corruption and vote-buying, due to several electoral fraud convictions after last year's upper house elections. End summary.

IN THE ATLAS

[1](#)2. (SBU) Our August 2 visit to the mountain town of Azrou yielded similar projections for the upcoming elections as discussed in ref C, which covered several neighboring cities. We spoke with two candidates, PJD and (socialist) USFP party, who are currently members of the local Municipal Council and they expected low to average voter turnout (50 percent, higher in the countryside than the city) due to general dissatisfaction with government. They added that voting would follow tribal lines, they welcomed international election observers, and were confident that corruption would be insignificant.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Both Azrou candidates expected at least 50 percent of young people to vote, although their reasons for this differed greatly. The more optimistic PJD President of the Municipal Council felt progress had been made since the last election, and he also asked for better relations with the USG. However, the USFP member, a 36-year veteran of the Municipal Council blamed the Council's President for presiding over "the worst council he had ever served on" and accused the PJD of buying votes to strengthen its place in local politics. He felt young people would vote in strong numbers because they were fed up with the poor performance of the region's current Members of Parliament (MPs). He was also the first respondent to mention the soon to be familiar

description of an MP's role -- to bring investment/public works projects to the region.

TRANS-ATLAS

¶4. (SBU) Across the Atlas Mountains, the mood of voters improved considerably. Representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and the Agricultural Chamber in Midelt reported high rates of voter registration and expected 80 percent voter turn out for the region (higher in the country side) as well as from young voters. They expected people to vote on the merit of individual personality rather than party affiliation, and to start emphasizing the value of an "educated" candidate. They expected a clean election and noted the corruption-related expulsion of five Upper Chamber MPs in 2006 as a watershed event that would help reduce future electoral corruption. They noted that no one wanted to risk losing his region's representation in government. They added that an MP's job is to bring investment to the region.

¶5. (SBU) Midelt's President of the Municipal Council (Istiqal party) seemed to be a role model for this new type of candidate. Speaking in English and claiming to have made dozens of visits to the U.S., he said his history of social activism had led him into politics. He noted three public works projects valued at over \$10 million that he had helped win for Midelt and added that local people had asked him to run for parliament because they knew he could help bring more investment to the area. He said it was not enough to be elected, one needed to be a member of a major party in order to have influence with ministers and GOM officials that could help deliver contracts and investment to Midelt. In an economically disadvantaged area like Midelt, he said this was an MP's main role. He added that Midelt had the highest number of newly registered voters in the province and he expected 60 to 80 percent voter participation and that young people would vote in high numbers too. He welcomed the idea of international election observers and felt the upcoming elections would be free of corruption.

¶6. (C) In Errachidia, 300 miles from Rabat, we met with an MP from the Movement Popular party and 20 of his friends and relatives. Collectively, they felt 70 percent of young people in their region would vote, an even higher amount than the general public. They added that political party affiliation was not an important criterion if voters knew the candidate could bring public works projects to the area. The MP admitted to having a long career in General Services and he knew how to "work the system" for funding. He had recently changed his party affiliation to the Environmental Party to better assure that he would be the number one person on his party's candidate list. Apparently, his former party had just attracted a new and very popular candidate that could possibly threaten his standing as the party's top candidate.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS GOOD, PJD BAD

¶7. (C) On August 3, we met with NGO and Chamber of Commerce representatives, and two additional parliamentary candidates -- the Vice President of Errachidia's Municipal Council and the President of the Municipal Council from the nearby city of Erfoud -- both representing the RNI party. All continued the mantra of the importance of bringing public investment to the region, strong participation by young voters, and approval of international election observers to discourage corruption. They added that Errachidia had a sizable population of university graduates that had remained unemployed for years, as is common in Morocco's larger cities, but they were too discouraged to participate in the election.

¶8. (SBU) In addition, they said that several people made unsolicited comments attacking the PJD for what they felt was

the shameless use of charity work to campaign for votes. They felt it was an affront to Islam and would backfire in the upcoming elections, although it appears to have worked in ¶2002. They felt PJD only represented 8 to 10 percent of the local population and thus far PJD officials had failed to represent local interests in favor of promoting PJD interests. Our interlocutors felt the PJD would win no more than one of Errachidia's six seats in parliament.

COMMENT

¶9. (U) Rural voters appear more optimistic about the elections than their urban counterparts. This is probably because in rural areas government contracts for public works account for a disproportionately large part of economic activity. Therefore, MPs have a comparatively larger role in the lives of their constituents. Our interlocutors discussed very few attributes of candidates other than their ability to bring public works projects to the region. The expulsion of five Upper Chamber MPs on corruption charges last year, and the King's recent call for citizens to take responsibility for their government by voting seemed to resonate with our rural audience and help account for their wide acceptance of international election observers.

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